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ABSTRACT

A project to design and implement a print rich classroom environment where all children could learn to read naturally was carried out as a result of federal funding under a Pre-elementary Right-to-Read grant. The project was designed to translate into practice theory-based propositions about environmental conditions that facilitate literacy acquisition. To discover and document the specific aspects of those classrooms with a successfully implemented program, classrooms were observed and written descriptions, slides, and videotapes were used to document incidences of print use. The following categories emerged: (1) type of language used, (2) location of print in the room, (3) availability of print to the child, (4) written language function, and (5) time frame of the print-related activity. The data were then used to examine differences between classrooms with and without successful programs, which led to the identification of multiple and varied stimuli for reading and writing, integrative print, continuing involvement, and child centered teachers as characteristics of an effective classroom environment. (HTH)

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# The Development of Written Language Awareness - Environmental Aspects[1]

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## The Development of Written Language Awareness-
## Environmental Aspects

Goodman and Goodman (1979) have contended that the goal in designing initial reading instruction should be "...to create conditions that help all students read as naturally as some do" (pg. 150). Observations of natural readers (Durkin, 1966) and other successful beginning readers (Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Hiebert, 1981) confirm the advantage of a literate and print rich environment; one in which children are consistently encouraged to actively engage in meaningful reading and writing. The problem for those who wish to design an environment where pupils can interact with written language in ways that resemble their meaningful and functional encounters with oral language is that for the most part functional use of print tends to depend upon literacy acquisition. Our previous research has indicated that low literate adults rarely resort to print even when they have minimal but functional ability to deal with the written word (Taylor, Wade, Jackson, Blum, & Goold, 1980). The challenge appears to be to design an environment where print is plentiful, meaningful and above all functional for young children.

An attempt to design and implement a print rich environment where all children could learn to read naturally was carried out as a result of federal funding under a Pre-elementary Right-to-Read grant (Project No. 533GH90245). The project was designed to translate into practice theory-based propositions about environmental conditions which facilitate literacy acquisition.

Project evaluation requirements were that we describe training aspects and document success in terms of student outcomes. Early in the project, however, it became apparent that teachers who were quick to grasp and implement project concepts had classrooms that looked very different from teachers who were slow to grasp and implement project concepts or who were not involved in the project. Since student outcome data indicate that students in classrooms where program concepts were implemented outperform students in classrooms which do not reflect program concepts (Blum, Taylor, Moeller, & Logsdon, 1980) it seemed important to try to discover in greater depth what distinguished implementing from nonimplementing classrooms. This paper reports on efforts to document the classroom characteristics of teachers who effectively implemented the program.

## Method

To discover and document the specific aspects of these successfully implementing classrooms a systematic attempt was made to isolate and verify characteristics of the classroom environment. The method used in this study was modeled after the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as well as data reduction procedures proposed by Spradley (1979). This method combines the advantages of qualitative methods designed to test existing theory and methods designed to generate new theoretical ideas, categories and their properties. The method seemed appropriate since theory and research provide some guidelines for environmental conditions but an indepth understanding of critical aspects was lacking.

This paper reports on the initial phase of a larger research effort. Theory and informed intuition would indicate that quantity and quality of print should be critical factors in learning to read naturally. Quantity was a distinguishing and easily observable characteristic of effectively implementing classrooms. Quality was more difficult to define and document although theory would indicate that factors such as meaningfulness and relevance should be present. But what do these terms mean? What makes print meaningful and relevant to prereaders? The discovery of these dimensions formed the purpose and questions for this first phase of research. Descriptions and documentation of the type and quantity of print in the classroom environment served as the data base.

In the first stage of the research, important features were identified from theory and our own intuition and these were used as initial parameters. Classrooms were observed; written descriptions, slides and video tapes were used to document incidences of print. Incidences were compared to discover the properties that characterized them. As categories began to emerge incidences within these categories were compared to further build a picture of the characteristics. For example, one distinguishing characteristic that emerged from theory and observation was that classrooms should contain large amounts of meaningful print. Initially we visited classrooms and documented examples to capture the variety of print that was found. These examples were classified and compared to discover the characteristics that distinguished them. Attention was given to identifying aspects that made the activities meaningful and relevant to children. From this stage a series of categories emerged. These included:

A. The Type of Language Used in the Example. Was the language at the word level or did it contain larger language units? Was the language familiar to the child or did it look like teacher composed language? Was the language relevant in content or did it deal with something that was likely to be of little interest to the child?

B. The Location of the Print in the Room. Where was it displayed and how prominently was it displayed?

C. The Availability of the Print to the Child. Was it accessible or was it simply on the wall as a display? Did it have interactional possibilities of any sort?

D. Written Language Function. What written language function was served by the print and hence had the potential for increasing the child's awareness of that function?

E. Time Frame. What were the time frame characteristics of the example? Was it an example of an ongoing activity thus enhancing the chance that the child would refer to the print on other occasions or was it a one shot experience? Did the example serve to generate other activity?

In the second phase these emerging categories were used to guide but not constrain further observation. At this point we were interested in further documentation and understanding of both the quantity and quality of print. Classrooms were observed and maps were drawn and print activities were listed and located. These activities were then rated for the absence and presence of the characteristics listed in the

initial category system. The mapping and rating were done simultaneously by two independent raters. The purpose of this was to verify that we were getting a true picture of the classroom and to refine category definitions.

## Results

Data from these observations were examined to identify domains (Spradley, 1979). Once domains were identified incidences that had been documented were included to represent a surface, but not exhaustive taxonomy of events occuring within the domain. These are represented in Table 1. These data represent examples across all classrooms.

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Place Table 1 about here

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These data were then used to further examine differences between implementing and nonimplementing classrooms. Effective classroom examples could be distinguished both in terms of their physical characteristics and in terms of the opportunities specifically structured by the teacher for interaction with written language. Comparison and contrast of examples from the two classroom groups were conducted. The results of this componential analysis is shown in Table 2.

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Place Table 2 about here

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Further analysis of the data led to the identification of the following characteristics of effective classrooms.

A. Multiple and Varied Stimuli for Reading. Effective classrooms contained many more opportunities for reading and these opportunities were extremely varied. In addition oppportunities were functionally linked to ongoing classroom activities. It was clearly apparent that these activities were integrated into the school lives of children. Effective classrooms contained many books and there were likely to be both books for enjoyment (literature) and books related to things that were being studied in the classroom (plants, animals, etc.). Effective classrooms tended to have a large number of incidences of written language used to direct and control, a major function served by written language. Again these language products were well integrated into ongoing classroom activities. Examples of these reading stimuli include schedules, two and three word directions, and signs. Effective classrooms also tended to reflect the incorporation of student writing as evidenced in student made books available for classroom consultation and student made signs.

B. Multiple and Varied Stimuli for Writing. Effective classrooms tended to reflect a unified approach to reading and writing. Reading and writing were seen as two aspects of the same process. As a consequence effective classrooms tended to reflect a large number of stimuli which provided children with functional reasons to write such as a message center used to exchange comments between teacher and pupil or between pupils themselves. Other examples included calendar activities, sign up list for ongoing classroom activities, etc. In addition these classrooms contained many physical stimuli to attract and motivate students to write spontaneously. These included writing centers well stocked with intriguing materials, magic markers, carbon paper, slates,

dictionaries, wordlists, word banks, and letters and numbers to trace, arrange, or stick on things.

C. Accessible and Functional Display of Children's Language Products. Not only were student generated and student related written products more numerous in effective classrooms, they also served a purpose. Effective classrooms contained print that was used daily; lists directed students to do traditional teacher activities such as attendance taking; other lists spelled out who would do what and when; and reference lists clearly reflected ongoing activities. Because these written products served a function in the classroom they were accessably displayed and used by students.

This last category is an example of how observable physical characteristics of the classroom also reflected the direct action taken by teachers to create opportunities to read and write. The categories that follow reflect the quality of these efforts.

D. Integrative Print. Examples in effective classrooms reflected a strong integration into the ongoing classroom activities. Classroom structure, content areas and instructional activities were carefully overlapped and interwoven to provide children with continuous meaningful experiences with written language. Effective teachers seemed to be thinking:

> Now how can I take what I normally do and find meaningful ways to get my students to read and write?
>
> -We always hatch eggs around Easter. What print opportunities does this provide? (Record keeping, check-off activities, referring to books as resources, chart writing, assignment of individuals to

turn the eggs, etc.)

-I have a classroom management problem. How can I use written language to help? (A sign that says ONLY THREE PEOPLE IN THE LOFT and a slot holder for names).

E. Ongoing Involvement. Closely related to the integrative component, teachers in effective classrooms seemed to have a knack for linking print with activities that can best be characterized as threads running through the week or month. Just as the whole of a piece of cloth is made of many interwoven threads so is the classroom day. Some of these threads represent daily occurring routines such as attendance, and milk count. Others represent discrete activities that spread over the period of several days or weeks. When teachers linked written language with these activities print tended to be referred to repeatedly and richer interaction occured.

F. Child Centered. Effective classroom teachers seem to be especially able to coordinate their goal of exposing children to written language with the child's interest, language and purpose. While what went on in the day clearly reflected planning, teachers' plans reflected a sensitivity to child interest. Statically this was reflected in the child centered nature of the written products, (e.g., child dictated signs, labels and children's products, etc.). Dynamically it was represented in the teacher's ability to shift focus depending on child response and to "think on their feet": to see the print potential in a spontaneous classroom incidence.

As can be seen, static aspects of the classroom environment can serve as documentation to characterize the environment of effectively implementing classrooms. Equally evident, however, is the fact that these static aspects are the result of a highly dynamic system. Effective teachers created many and varied incidences in which print could be used meaningfully and functionally by students. The best examples were linking activities that reflected an integration of print into the child's classroom day. It seemed apparent from language learning research that language emerges to serve a communicative function. Mothers or other significant caretakers do specific things to facilitate language acquisition within the functional/communicative context. If students are to learn to read naturally we must somehow reconstruct the parameters of this language learning environment to the world of print. We must make print function as meaningfully and as purposefully as oral language. We contend that this is not a natural task; written language emerged because of a need to preserve a message across time and space, to address an absent audience. Young children's lives do not reflect this need. We can, however, through our own awareness create a classroom environment that reflects this need. This is what our effective classroom teachers seem to have been able to do.

This paper represents a beginning attempt to document some of the characteristics of classroom environment that promote print awareness in young children. This documentation came from evidence that was observable in static displays of written language in classrooms. These static products, however, reflect dynamic decisions by teachers and are likely to be affected by other classroom factors not documented in this study. We suspect, for example, that the substance of the classroom day

has a direct influence on the quality and quantity of print experiences. Further research is needed to identify these variables and the way they interact with teachers' efforts to incorporate print into children's lives.

Some of this can be done by further observational research. There were clear teacher differences in this project. Some teachers were able to grasp and implement and rapidly expand on ideas presented in the inservice classes. Others were much slower. Why was this so? While there is wide spread recognition for the effect of the teacher variable, little has been done to investigate teachers' conception of their instruction. (See Barr & Duffy, 1978, for one effort). Ethnographic methodology could make a significant contribution in this area since it is designed to construct meaning from the participant's view. How do effective teachers in our study perceive the task of designing experiences for children? What classroom processes and characteristics are seen as facilitating this task?

Leinhardt (1980) has proposed a model of classroom processes that included four classroom process constructs. These are motivators in the environment that encourage learning; curricular and temporal opportunities to learn curricular material; the structure of the instructional material itself; and the quality of the instructional events. Models such as this one can guide the discovery and documentation of classroom variables related to the development of print awareness and can be used to test causal models of classroom processes.

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## Footnote

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Table 1

Domains and Taxonomic Analysis of Written Language Displays

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| WRITTEN LANGUAGE DISPLAYS | Books | Commercially published story books | |
| | | Commercially published reference/information books | |
| | | Individual child authored stories | |
| | | Group child authored stories | |
| | | Individual child authored information books | |
| | | Group authored information books | |
| | Communications | Child authored notes | |
| | | Child authored messages | |
| | | Child authored letters | |
| | | Adult authored notes | |
| | | Adult authored messages | |
| | | Adult authored letters | |
| | Lists | Sign up | |
| | | Record | Songs we know |
| | | | Books we read |
| | | | What we saw on our science walk |
| | | Summary | Animals we saw at the zoo |
| | | | Paintings we saw on our museum trip |
| | | Reference | Color chart |
| | | | Alphabet chart |
| | | | Sight word list |
| | Directions | Classroom rules | |
| | | Directions for activities | |
| | | Directions for use of centers | |
| | | Recipes | |
| | | Personal directives (do not move these blocks) | |

Table 1 (continued)

Domains and Taxonomic Analysis of Written Language Displays (continued)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| WRITTEN LANGUAGE DISPLAYS (cont'd) | Schedules | | Daily activity schedule |
| | | | Monthly objectives |
| | | | Diary calendar |
| | | | Choice time selection |
| | | | Job schedule |
| | | | Attendance schedule |
| | | | Group rotation schedule |
| | Labels | Organi-zation | Location of centers or activity areas |
| | | | Contents of shelves |
| | | | Containers that hold things |
| | | Identifi-cation | Labeled color chips |
| | | | Pictures labeled for reference (this is a ) |
| | | | Captioned art work |
| | Writing Materials | | Paper |
| | | | Chalkboard |
| | | | Flannel boards |
| | | | Pens |
| | | | Pencils |
| | | | Markers |
| | | | Crayons |
| | | | Staples |
| | | | Glue |
| | | | Scissors |
| | | | Stencils |

Table 1 (continued)

Domains and Taxonomic Analysis of Written Language Displays (continued)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| WRITTEN LANGUAGE DISPLAYS (cont'd) | Writing Materials (cont'd) | Dittos |
| | | Things to trace |
| | | Color forms |
| | | Plastic letters |
| | | Chalk |

Table 2

Componential Analysis of Written Language Displays

| | Effective | Ineffective |
|---|---|---|
| ACCESSIBLE | -In activity centers<br>-Easily observable<br>-Displayed low so students could get up close | -In areas of non use - out of flow<br>-Frequently obscured by other things in the room<br>-Displayed high on the wall or limited to bulletin boards |
| PURPOSE | -Designed for use by students<br>-Frequently designed so parts could be manipulated<br>-Directions<br>-Record of classroom events<br>-Facilitate classroom routines<br>-Planning for future<br>-Used by children to do something | -Designed for display<br>-Static, not designed to be used<br>-No clear purpose<br>-Lists<br>-Labels<br>-Decorations (bulletin boards) |
| LANGUAGE | -Whole sentences & stories<br>-Topic centered<br>-Topic reflects classroom activities<br>-When at word level reflects larger concept (sign up: )<br>-Language reflects child's input | -One word or limited phrase<br>-Lists<br>-Reflects system imposed priorities<br>-Language reflects teacher composition |

Table 2 (continued)

Componential Analysis of Written Language Displays (continued)

| | Effective | Ineffective |
|---|---|---|
| CHILDREN'S WRITING | -Child made books<br>-Examples of spontaneous writing by children<br>-Child language used to label products | -Children copy<br>-Children's writing largely restricted to ditto's |
| CHANGE | -Displays change frequently<br>-Particular activities change in form as children's abilities change | -Displays change rarely<br>-Once conceived activity rarely changed |